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Treason as a Trivial Pursuit

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In 1977, 22-year-old Christopher Boyce was convicted of treason. Only a few months earlier, he'd decided to stop handing over U.S. military secrets to the Soviet Union. At that time, the Soviet spy to whom Boyce had been regularly delivering the goods for two years urged him to continue his treachery. Boyce sneered in response: "I'm not like you. This isn't a career for me. It was an impulse."

Later, when some Mexican policemen tried to force Boyce's accomplice, Andrew Daulton Lee, to confess to a trumped-up murder rap by beating him and sticking his head down a toilet bowl, Lee squealed: "I'm not a communist. I'm not an assassin. I'm just a spy."

And so was the crime of treason reduced to a trivial pursuit. People turn trait-

Film
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"The Falcon and the Snowman"

tor for a variety of reasons—love, money, even conviction—but *impulse*? Nor were Boyce and Lee burned-out cases; their torches had never been lit.

No wonder "The Falcon and the Snowman," the story of convicted traitors Boyce and Lee and the secrets they sold, became a best-selling book for Robert Lindsey, the Los Angeles bureau chief of the New York Times. This particular perversion of the American Dream fairly quivered with symbolism. Boyce and Lee, former altar boys, were raised in upper-middle-class suburban comfort, sheltered but not immune from the turmoil shaking the country in the '60s. Lee became a drug dealer, Boyce a seminary dropout. Still, their hobbies were golf and falconry, not politics.

Mr. Lindsey's account of the story raised but left unanswered this question: Were the two natural byproducts of the transmutation of American society taking place while they grew up or merely deviants? The other big unanswered question, the one that helped give this real-life spy story its tragicomic thrust: Was the Central Intelligence Agency really that stupid? (It was the CIA's civilian subcontractor, after all, that placed a 21-year-old college dropout in a position to read highly classified messages—and other sensitive messages the CIA regularly misrouted.)

The movie that director John Schle-

singer has made out of this story is most effective when it tells what happens and to whom, and least effective when it tries to figure out why. He sets up the parasitic relationships between Lee and Boyce and between the American spies and the Soviets in a series of deftly paced vignettes. He makes us understand the planning and tension and theatricality that goes into the business of spying, even as he underscores the absurdity of these particular spies (Lee the drugged-out hustler, Boyce the corrupted choirboy).

Mr. Schlesinger undercuts the force of his narrative every time he tries to make a



Sean Penn, Timothy Hutton

connection between this "nice guy," Boyce, and the not very nice practice of selling state secrets. For example, the scenes with his pretty girlfriend are almost embarrassingly flimsy. Presumably the purpose of sketching this relationship is to underscore that Boyce's crime was especially surprising because he seemed so sweet. Instead, these scenes stop the story cold. The confrontations between Boyce and his father (convincingly played by Pat Hingle), which do serve a narrative purpose, are too fleeting.

Part of the problem lies with Timothy Hutton, who plays Boyce. He broods and smiles and smokes cigarettes with great exactitude. There is a lot of intensity. Too much intensity. His character, like too many of the characters he has played, smolders too deliberately. We always get to see the wounds but not the soul.

At the end, just in case we haven't caught the numerous hints alluding to Boyce's disillusionment with his country,

we are forced to listen to several minutes of Boyce's political theory as formulated from news headlines. Not only is this dramatically anticlimactic, it gives too much intellectual weight to the moral confusion that created this impulsive spy.

But these bits of static don't short-circuit the story's energy. Mr. Schlesinger knows how to bite into unusual relationships (as he showed us in "Midnight Cowboy" and "Sunday, Bloody Sunday") and how to pace suspense (as he did in "Marathon Man"). He convincingly sets up the whacked-out subhole called "The Vault," where three low-level clerks with top-security clearance ripped and filed messages about CIA spy satellites.

In this aseptic, fluorescent-lit room cluttered with teletypes and file cabinets, the three listened to rock music, drank the Margaritas they mixed in the paper shredder, and ripped and filed—except for Boyce, who ripped and filed and read. He figured out that the messages he was decoding weren't meant for his eyes and might be interesting to the Russians.

Although it was Boyce who came up with the plan to sell these secrets to the Russians, it was his old friend Daulton Lee, hustler *extraordinaire*, who did the legwork. Lee's motives were simple. He was a drug pusher who'd gotten busted one time too many. He wanted to make some dough.

As this swaggering, insecure gamecock of a spy, Sean Penn is a marvel to watch. He pushes Lee, with his scruffy hair, ugly but expensive clothes and silly, thin mustache, right up to the edge of buffoonery. Yet he always keeps us tuned into the desperation barely covered by the braggadocio. For him, this is just another hustle (at one point he tries to talk the Russians into importing heroin for him to deal as a little side venture). There's a lightness to his voice, a kind of little man's hopping energy that brings back memories of the young Dustin Hoffman.

Mr. Penn is especially exciting to watch because his performances change so much from film to film. In "Bad Boys" his portrayal of the bad kid daring to go straight was grimly powerful. Yet his dimly connected surfer Jeff Spicoli in "Fast Times at Ridgemont High" was a study in stoned-out hilarity, his Henry Nash in "Racing With the Moon" a sweet and gentle romantic lead.

"The Falcon and the Snowman" would be worth seeing just for Mr. Penn. And even if Mr. Schlesinger doesn't reach the lofty heights of morality play he seems to be groping for, he has put together a spy story that's pretty good stuff.